

IT wasn't easy saying "Rothmans Isthmian League" yesterday morning. But it's from this unlikely soapbox that English football takes the first lesson of the New Year.

Wycombe Wanderers, who play their football with a smile in the foot-hills of the Chilterns, are offering honesty, commonsense and a mighty smack in the mouth.

They meet First Division joint-leaders Middlesbrough on their Loakes Park pitch this weekend—a pitch which, they say, gives them no advantage despite an 11ft crossfield slope.

Manager Brian Lee kids nobody. He insists Wycombe are still amateurs and says: "What chance against Middles-

brough? We've no chance whatsoever."

Managers in cup week are not supposed to talk like that. He's right, of course, but he should hide behind such pearls of intelligence as:

"The FA Cup is a great leveller. They've only 11 players, same as us."

Or: "I've never known our lads so relaxed. I think it's the special training—we've done underwater snooker this year."

But in the baronial splendour of Bisham Abbey, where he is

HONESTLY, WYCOMBE

Boss Brian slams stars—professionals make him mad

director of the Sport Council's recreation complex, Lee levelled his reasoning on several home truths for the well-paid footballers of League soccer.

"If we were playing a side with a few prima donnas—Newcastle, perhaps—we might have a chance. But we're not.

"I have tremendous respect for Jack Charlton. Middlesbrough owe everything to him. They

will be thoroughly prepared.

"They don't have stars. They work hard, are well organised, efficient, and must be among the favourites for Wembley. No, we've no chance."

Misuse

Even in defeat Wycombe believe they have a point to prove. Like the attitude of their players,

the accountants, estate agents, teachers, brick-layers and company directors who make up the team.

Lee added: "To become an amateur player at our level they have to sacrifice a lot of personal life.

"We have a minimum time to prepare and we use it. Professionals have a maximum time—and misuse it.

"We have an appetite

for the game that a few pros should copy. But how can they develop an appetite when the money is already in the bank?"

Painful

Wycombe expect to lose on Saturday. But they'll enjoy it. They won't hide.

They can't understand—or even believe—the behaviour of the Bests, Beatties, Bowles and

Wellers of the world. Lee said: "You get a greater degree of honesty in amateur football. In our game you have honest effort, with possibly, a dishonest payment.

"Last season we played 86 matches. The top professional clubs make a great song and dance about playing 60. They make me weep."

So, Wycombe look forward to defeat. It could be heavy and painful. But they'll turn up—and wait until full-time for their bath.